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TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

FIGHTING TO FLY



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During World War II the United States Army Air Corps assembled the first fighter squadron in its history made up of Black military pilots. Many years later they became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. The accomplishments they realized, and adversity they faced down, helped light the path toward the modern Civil Rights Movement.

The story of the Tuskegee Airmen began on January 16, 1941, when the U.S. War Department announced plans to create a “Negro pursuit squadron.” The selected few would be sent to Alabama to train at Tuskegee University, a school already known for producing highly-skilled civilian pilots. Reaction to the announcement was not universally positive, especially within the Army Air Corps. Although Black men had served in the U.S. military long before World War II, they were not allowed to fly fighter or bomber airplanes. Many military leaders did not think Black men were smart enough or capable of handling war planes, although Black pilots had ably flown for France during World War I.

In late March of 1941, Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, visited the airfield near Tuskegee University. She expressed an interest in taking a flight in one of the school’s training aircraft. The pilot for her flight was C. Alfred Anderson, who was Tuskegee University’s chief instructor pilot. Anderson, who was Black, earned his pilot’s license in 1929. Mrs. Roosevelt was impressed with Anderson’s

skills. Soon after the First Lady’s visit to Alabama, the War Department formally approved a contract to establish a primary flying school at Tuskegee. The first class of Black aviation cadets began training at Tuskegee on July 19, 1941. Twelve men were trained to become military pilots, although only five made it through the entire program, graduating on March 7, 1942. Those five were the first of nearly 1,000 Black men in 44 classes who would receive fighter or bomber pilot training and graduate between 1941 and 1946 at Tuskegee. Among the members of that first graduating class was Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Davis would go on to become a key leader and commander of the squadrons and fighter groups the Tuskegee Airmen would serve with throughout World War II.

When America entered World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the nation’s need for new pilots to deploy overseas as part of fighter and bomber squadrons greatly increased. Yet resistance to the idea of using Black pilots in actual wartime scenarios persisted within the military. The training taking place at Tuskegee was considered an experiment by government officials and civilian observers alike, and many openly expressed their confidence the experiment would fail. However, the number of Black military pilots trained at Tuskegee continued to grow, and by August of 1942 enough had graduated to form a full fighter squadron of 33 pilots. These pilots were assigned to the 99th Fighter Squadron.



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During the war, fighter and bomber squadrons were activated, deployed, moved around, merged with other units, moved around some more, deactivated and then activated again to repeat the process – all along often receiving different numerical and name designations. The squadrons and groups in which the Tuskegee Airmen flew were no different. At one point toward the end of the war, all the units in which Tuskegee Airmen flew were gathered together as part of the 332nd Fighter Group, which consisted of the 99th, 101st, 301st and 302nd Fighter Squadrons. These European-based squadrons were responsible for many jobs during the war, including dive bombing bridges, strafing enemy targets on the ground, patrolling coastal areas and – most famously – for escorting bombers with the aim of protecting the large aircraft from enemy fighter attack. Each of these squadrons included more than pilots. They included mechanics, cooks, doctors, nurses and others. Most of these duties also were done by Black men and women because the military kept Black and White people segregated from each other.

Tuskegee fighter pilots primarily flew four different types of aircraft. These included the P-39 Airacobra, P-40 Warhawk, P-47 Thunderbolt, and P-51 Mustang. All were single engine fighters with progressively more power and ability to out maneuver enemy aircraft. The P-51 Mustang was a favorite among pilots and the aircraft most often associated with the Tuskegee Airmen, although they were among the last pilots to gain access to the airplane due to the

continuing racism among military officials who did not want Black men fighting alongside them.

Every squadron painted their airplanes with different patterns of colors to help other pilots easily spot which aircraft belonged to which squadron during the heat of battle in the air. The Tuskegee Airmen often painted a portion of their aircraft's tail red, and finally painted the entire tail red when they began flying the P-51 Mustang. It was for this reason that during the war these Black pilots were known as "Red Tails." In fact, the name "Tuskegee Airmen" was not coined until well after World War II, in 1955, when a history of the famous group was published in a book called "The Tuskegee Airmen – The Story of the Negro in the U.S. Air Force."

That story is one of brave heroes who fought for their nation's freedom at a time when too many citizens of that nation fought to keep Black men and women from enjoying those same freedoms. Veteran Tuskegee Airmen, of which there are fewer and fewer still alive, are fond of pointing out to people that skin color didn't matter to an enemy who was shooting at you or your buddies. Sadly, skin color continued to matter in America, even as the "Red Tails" were scoring impressive victory after victory in Europe. In April 1945, at Freeman Field in Kentucky, 61 Black officers from the 477th Bombardment Group were arrested for trying to enter the base's White's only Officer's Club. Even more Black officers were arrested for refusing to sign a regulation regarding separate Clubs for Blacks



and Whites. After being moved to a different airfield, they all were released a month later with an official reprimand added to their personal records.

Resistance to the Tuskegee Airmen “experiment” persisted. In November 1945, a War Department committee presented a report to the U.S. Army Chief of Staff in which the record of the 332nd Fighter Group’s “Red Tails” was compared with three other P-51 squadrons flying in Europe. The report both praised and criticized the performance of the Black pilots, but in calling out their shortcomings used contradictory information. For example, while White squadrons recorded more enemy fighters shot down during bomber escort missions, the Black squadrons lost fewer bombers to enemy attack because they did not leave their bombers alone to pursue the fighters. The report also called for the military to seek out greater opportunities for even more Black men and women to serve, but it fell short of asking for the complete desegregation of the Army. It wasn’t until July 1948 that President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order to desegregate the military, a milestone in civil rights history made possible by the Tuskegee Airmen.

Today, the once-experimental program to use Black pilots in mostly all Black squadrons and groups is known as the “Tuskegee Experience.” All the men and women who served at Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama, or in any of the programs that were part of the “Tuskegee Experience,” no matter their sex or skin color, are considered by the history books as Tuskegee Airmen. Some estimates say that number ranges from 16,000 to 19,000 persons.

The Tuskegee Airmen proved they were as good as any other group of fighter pilots during World War II. Together they flew more than 1,800 missions, including 351 bomber escort missions. They recorded 112 aerial victories in which enemy aircraft, including three German jets, were shot down. Three “Red Tails” each scored four enemy aircraft shot down, which meant there were no “aces” among the Black pilots. A pilot must shoot down five enemy aircraft to be considered an “ace.” Of the 996 pilots who graduated from the Tuskegee program, 352 were deployed overseas and 84 of those lost their lives.

Many historical accounts, including those by Tuskegee Airmen themselves, claim they never lost a bomber to enemy fire. This is a myth that began during a wartime atmosphere in which the public was looking for positive news, and some wanted to exaggerate the success of the Black pilots. In fact, a careful review of war documents by Air Force historians revealed the Tuskegee Airmen lost 27 bombers during seven missions. Yet that number remains impressive considering the average number of bombers lost by the other six fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force was 46.

The Tuskegee Airmen was a successful experiment that helped the U.S. win the war in Europe, and led to the end of racial segregation in the U.S. military. Their example has inspired countless others to see beyond skin color and seek equality for all.

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